

## Narrative inquiry and autoethnography

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# Narrative inquiry and autoethnography

By

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This chapter is concerned with narrative inquiry as a methodological contingency for physical cultural studies (PCS). After providing a definitional effort of narrative inquiry and some reasons as to why stories matter, one narrative approach, that is autoethnography, is focused on. Autoethnography in the plural is described and some reasons for using it offered. Several challenges that go with doing an autoethnography are also highlighted. The chapter closes with some future directions related to ‘evidence’ that physical cultural researchers might take up.

#### Narrative inquiry: A definitional effort

Just like defining PCS, no definitive definition of narrative inquiry can be given. This is because there are different theoretical positions to understanding narrative inquiry (see Schiff, 2013), differing definitions of narrative (see Frank, 2012), and diverse types of narrative analysis (see Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). This diversity and difference acknowledged, a definitional effort can be offered: narrative inquiry is a psychosocial approach that focuses on stories. But why stories? The seven claims and premises offered are neither exhaustive nor are they mutually exclusive, but they begin to map a vast terrain. Together they also add detail and depth to the definitional effort offered.

First, people are storytelling creatures (Frank, 2010). Stories are ubiquitous in culture and we have a tendency to tell and enact stories in our everyday lives. Given the ubiquity of stories and the human propensity for storytelling, it seems sensible then for researchers within PCS to consider attending to narrative rather than simply dismissing it as a very rare human activity undeserving of attention (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, in-press; Fasting & Svela Sand 2015).

Second, people need stories because of the work they *do* for us, which primarily, is to help make the world meaningful (Frank, 2010; Schiff, 2013). The world in itself is

not naturally ordered or experientially meaningful but is rather what William James famously called a ‘blooming, buzzing confusion.’ What work narratives do for us is help turn the ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ of the world into a meaningful place (Frank, 2010). Narratives do this by ordering events, providing a template to make sense of things, teaching us what to pay attention to, and showing us how to respond to what we attend to (Frank, 2010). Third, stories connect and disconnect people and groups (Frank, 2010; Caddick, Phoenix, & Smith, 2015). Fourth, and extending the work of stories further, stories teach us who we are by constituting our identities and sense of self (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Given these claims and premises of narrative inquiry, it would seem that stories matter in the lives of humans. To ignore stories would then be to disregard a key part of how humans make meaning and are able to live in society.

Fifth, stories are actors in that they shape what *becomes* experience (Frank, 2010). Stories neither emerge from the individual mind nor are simply representations of experience. Stories are developed from the menu of narratives culture supplies and, rather than being passive, these narratives do things. What these narratives crucially do, as actors in our world (Frank, 2010), is shape what we come to know as experience. Sixth, stories also act on us by partly shaping human conduct. What we think, know, perceive, feel, and do is shaped by the stories that culture makes available to us (Caddick, Smith, & Phoenix, 2015; Phoenix & Orr, 2014). If narrative is a key actor in our lives, then narratives cannot be simply dismissed. None of this is to claim that stories do everything or that our lives can be reduced to narrative. Rather it is to say that if stories partly shape human life, and affect what we do and don’t do, then narrative needs to be attended to within PCS.

Seventh, humans are active storytellers. Stories might act on us by shaping experience and how we behave, but humans are also actors. One way to act – to perform

agency – is through storytelling. For example, a person can act by selecting or editing a certain story in order to do something like motivate a group. Given that stories are a crucial means and medium of performing agency, focusing on stories provides insights into how people shape physical cultures.

#### Autoethnography: What is it and why do it?

As noted, there are different kinds of narrative inquiry. One way of sorting these is to make a distinction between work that takes the stance of the *story analyst* and work that takes the stance of the *storyteller* (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Bochner & Riggs, 2013). A story analyst refers to a stance in which the researcher places narratives *under* analysis and produces an abstract account *of* narratives. To do this stories are subjected to a narrative analysis (e.g., thematic narrative analysis) and results are communicated in the form of a realist tale. The upshot is research done *on* narratives. In contrast, when a researcher takes the stance of a storyteller the story *is* the analysis, meaning that the analysis itself *is* a form of storytelling. To do this data is recast *as* a story by using a *creative analytical practice* (CAP). As described by Richardson (2000), CAP is an umbrella term for research that is cast into highly accessible storied forms, such as creative non-fiction or ethnodrama. Another type of CAP that a storyteller might use for certain purposes is autoethnography.

According to Allen-Collinson (2012), autoethnography is “a relatively novel research methodology within the range of qualitative forms utilised in research on sport and physical culture” (p. 192). In general, it refers to a highly personalised form of qualitative research in which researchers tell stories that are based on their own lived experiences and interactions with others within social contexts, relating the personal to the cultural in the process and product. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe it, autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of research that displays multiple layers of

consciousness, connecting personal lived experiences to the cultural.

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations ...

Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto). (Ellis & Bochner, pp. 739-740)

Autoethnographic research can be represented in numerous ways. This includes short-stories, poetry, vignettes, and layered accounts. Autoethnographies can be written, performed, visually communicated, produced digitally and so on. Just as there are numerous ways to communicate autoethnographic research, there are now also different strands of autoethnography. As Allen-Collinson (2012) noted, “the autoethnographic genre is open to a vast range of styles and usages...This openness to different forms, and refusal to be pigeonholed, is perhaps one of the great strengths of autoethnographic research” (p. 196). The different strands and uses of autoethnography that have developed over the years include the following.

*Evocative autoethnography*, or what is sometimes termed emotional autoethnography, takes a literary approach to research by seeking to show, rather than tell, theory through emotionally driven stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). The goal is evocation in terms of creating an emotional resonance with the reader and a heartfelt understanding of culture. Calling on the interpretive openness of stories (Frank, 2010), and the belief that stories are theoretical in their own right (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), another goal is to let the story do theoretical work, on its own, as a story. This is sought by showing theory through the story, rather than telling readers what the story is meant to theoretically convey. Or put in the terms of Barone (2000), the autoethnographic

researcher writes as an *artful writer-persuader* by relinquishing control over the interpretations placed on a story, inviting an aesthetic reading whereby readers interpret the text from their own unique vantage points, contributing their own questions-answers-experiences to the story as they read or watch it, as co-participants in the creation of meaning. Examples of an evocative autoethnography that connect with PCS can be found in the work of Smith (2013a) on how neo-liberalism that pervades the physical culture of universities can create artificial persons, and Ellis (2014) on chronic pain, arthritis, and exercise.

Another autoethnographic option for physical cultural researchers, and perhaps the most popular to date in sport and PCS, is *analytic autoethnography* (Anderson, 2006). Like emotional autoethnographies, this type of autoethnography aims to deliver evocative stories. An analytic autoethnography differs however from an emotional autoethnography in that the author tells readers at some point what the story they crafted aims to theoretically do. Thus, analytic autoethnographers produce a theoretical autopsy of the story whereas in an emotional autoethnography this is resisted. Or put in the terms of Barone (2000), rather than operating as an artful writer-persuader, the autoethnographic researcher writes as a *declarative author-persuader* by seeking direct control over the interpretations placed on a story in the act of reading, listening, watching and so on. Examples of analytic autoethnography that shed light on physical culture can be found in McGannon's (2012) story of her exercise identity and running experiences, Chawansky's (2015) vignettes of engaging in sport, development and peace research, Fisette's (2015) tale of injury, illness, and a performing identity, Caudwell's (2015) narrative of the pleasures of moving, and Mills (2015) deconstruction reconstruction of a coaching identity.

*Autophenomenography*, as described by Allen-Collinson (2011, 2012), is an

autobiographical genre that is framed by phenomenology (e.g. empirical phenomenology). The researcher in the process and product is positioned and acknowledged as both researcher and participant in her or his study of a particular phenomenon, instead of a particular social group that shares a common culture. As Allen-Collinson (2012) noted, although cultural location and lived experience are closely inter-twined, “the primary focus is upon the researcher’s lived experience of a phenomenon or phenomena rather than upon his or her cultural or subcultural location...In autophenomenography, the self is engaged with in a specific way: in relation to phenomena, or things as they appear to the conscious mind” (p. 207). An example of how an autophenomenography might be done can be found in Allen-Collinson (2012).

How autoethnographic work might be done within PCS has expanded further to include *meta-autoethnography* (Ellis, 2009). This is an autoethnography that builds on one previously produced by the researcher. It involves a researcher revisiting their previous autoethnography, considering the responses of others and the author to this former representation in the time that has elapsed since its production, and then generating an autoethnographic account about the original autoethnography to stimulate further reflection on key personal and cultural issues. Few meta-autoethnographies exist in sport and exercise (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). A rare physical culture example that mentions this kind of autoethnography can be found in Sparkes (2013).

Most often evocative autoethnographies, analytical autoethnographies, autophenomenographies, and meta-autoethnographies are produced by one researcher. However, there is the option of two or more people working together to craft an autography for certain purposes. When this occurs the researchers engage in producing what is known as a *collaborative autoethnography*, or what has also been termed a



duoethnography or, when there are multiple people involved in the collaboration, a community autoethnography. An example of a collaborative-autoethnography that connects with PCS can be found in the work of McMahon and Penny (2011) on the culture of body pedagogies within swimming in Australia, Smith and Sparkes (2012) reflections of witnessing a chaos narrative, and Scarfe and Marlow's (2015) narrative of running with epilepsy.

Having highlighted what an autoethnography is along with its various strands, why might researchers studying physical culture consider using autoethnographies? One response is that this kind of narrative inquiry has fidelity and connects with many of the key elements of the PCS project. For example, PCS and autoethnography are largely qualitative projects that are characterised by a commitment to social and cultural theory. Autoethnography is also faithful to the PCS project in that it promotes self-reflexivity. Both autoethnography and PCS foreground the body-self of the researcher as unavoidably situated within research practice. As such, there is a need for the researcher to critically turn their gaze on their own embodied selves, examining in the process how they themselves shape relationships in field, knowledge, and so forth. Indeed, according to Chang (2008), part of the conceptual framework for autoethnography is based on the assumption that "the reading and writing of self-narrative provides a window through which the self and others can be examined and understood" (p. 13).

PCS and autoethnographic research additionally share a political commitment as well as promote a critical and public pedagogy. As Chang notes (2008), conceptually autoethnography is based on the assumption that it "is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners gain profound understanding of self and other and function more effectively with others from diverse cultures" (p. 13). For instance, like PCS, autoethnographies are often designed to impact learning

communities within the academy, in the classroom, and throughout broader publics. In such contexts, the two often share a commitment to revealing socio-cultural inequities, injustices, and oppressive practices, how these are reproduced and resisted, and what might progressively be done to facilitate social change.

When crafted well, autoethnographies are particularly valuable for doing such political, critical and public pedagogy for at least two reason reasons. First, autoethnographies carefully collect, analyse, and represent stories. Stories, unlike more traditional ways of ‘writing up research’, are highly accessible to the general public. As such, through stories physical culture researchers can reach audiences to facilitate a political, critical and public pedagogy. Second, and as noted, stories are not passive but do things; they act on, for, and with people. Thus, this form of discourse can be harnessed to not only communicate and circulate knowledge to different audiences. It can be used as part of a critical and public pedagogy to do certain things in learning communities. This might include *conscientization*, that is, breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness (Freire, 2000). As part of this process, oppressive bodily practices can be challenged, different ways of being opened up, and existing power relations as they are manifest within, and experienced through, the complex field of physical culture transformed. In such ways, autoethnographic stories become crucial equipment for the PSC project.

Another connection between PCS and autoethnography that, in turn, makes the latter a useful methodological option for physical culture researchers, is the focus on bodies. PCS often looks to explicate how active bodies become organised, disciplined, embodied, experienced, and represented in cultural sites and activities, like sport, fitness, leisure, wellness, and health related movement practices. One way to help with this is through the collection, critical examination, and representation of stories through

autoethnographic work. This is because in various ways narrative is central to being and having a body. For example, as Hydén (2014) explains, “telling and listening to stories is an activity that is accomplished through the use of bodies. Both telling and listening to stories involve bodily processes: the body and its parts are used as communicative instruments and as resources for structuring and interpreting stories” (p. 139). As active storytellers, bodies also tell stories that can do things on, and with and for other bodies, thereby helping to organise, represent and shape physical culture. At the same time, bodies are partly shaped by the narratives that circulate in culture. For instance, as actors in our world, narratives can shape our fleshy physicality, how we think about bodies, and how we make sense of our felt bodily emotions. They can perform the ‘positive’ and ‘dangerous’ work of teaching bodies who they ought to be, who they might like to be, who they can be, and which bodies to value and disregard (Frank, 2010). Moreover, the stories we are taught in the context of our social locations, and take on board, dwell and settle in our bodies, getting under our skin to develop and sustain embodied dispositions or habitual ways of acting. This is known as our narrative habitus (Frank, 2010; Smith, 2013b). In such ways, then, narrative is not only entwined with physical culture. It is again crucial equipment for doing and advancing PCS.

Finally, though by no means least, according to Allen-Collinson (2012) when well crafted autoethnographies are a means of gaining richly textured and nuanced insights into personal lived experience and emotions, and situating these within a wider socio-cultural context. We can thus learn a great deal from autoethnographies about the particular socio-cultural processes, experiences, emotions and realities involved in the unfolding of physical culture.

The ‘insider’ perspective gives autoethnographers the advantage of access to in-depth and often highly nuanced meanings, knowledge about, and lived

experience of the field of study. This brings into play a wide range of resources, which would not normally be available to ‘outsider’ researchers. In inviting the reader to share the feeling and sensations, and to connect with the author’s experience, autoethnographers often write highly readable, insightful and thought provoking-work, vividly bringing alive sub/cultural experiences for those unfamiliar with the social terrain under study. (Allen-Collinson, 2012, pp. 205-206)

It would seem then that autoethnography holds great possibilities for developing PCS. This said, doing autoethnographic research is often difficult. It not only requires high levels of critical awareness, self-discipline, and reflexivity from the researcher. Strong literary writing skills are needed to craft a high quality autoethnography. Further, irrespective of the quality, researchers’ may be accused of producing self-indulgent research. This accusation *can* have merit in that some autoethnographies can be self-indulgent. However, as Sparkes (2002) makes clear, any *universal* charge that *all* autoethnographic research is self-indulgent is problematic and needs challenging. For example, well crafted autoethnographies move beyond the navel gazing individual who looks just inside their own body to a deeper analysis in which lived experience is connected to the surrounding socio-cultural structures. Furthermore, argued Sparkes, autoethnographies can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy and connection that extend beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to understanding of physical culture in ways that, among others, are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, and self-luminous.

Ethics is another key issue facing researchers embarking on any autoethnography. For example, normally, in autoethnography the researcher is the central and identifiable character whose intimate thoughts and actions, often in sensitive

contexts, are illuminated in great detail for the reader. This potentially places the author/researcher in a position of vulnerability as their life is laid bare to colleagues, family and friends, and actual and prospective employers. Publishing an autoethnography has the potential to harm the researcher in both the present and the future as s/he is unable to retract what has been written and also has no control over how readers might choose to interpret sensitive biographical information. In view of this, Muncey (2010) recommends that consideration be given to who can be harmed by the academic piece and what might be the consequences for them. She asks, “In it the author is exposed for scrutiny; what risk can they do to themselves or the academy?” (p. 106). In addition, the researcher needs to consider the implications on other people who are revealed, named, and implicated in the stories. Autoethnographers need to consider carefully how (and indeed if) certain others are included and represented within the write-up of the research. This raises tricky questions around anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent.

Anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent are ethical dilemmas in autoethnography in that, for example, people in the story may be deductively identified through their physical characteristics, attitudes, actions, and relationships with others. But, as Allen-Collinson (2002), Ellis (2004, 2007), Muncey (2010), and Tollich (2010) argue, none of this means that writing and publishing ethical autoethnographic is impossible. Here it is useful to go beyond traditional ethics, such as utilitarianism and principlism, and harness also various aspirational ethical positions (see Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For example, in discussing her own autoethnographic work Ellis (2007) aligns herself with an ethics in practice along with a relational ethics and an ethics of care.

Central to relational ethics is the question “What should I do now?” rather than

the statement “This is what you should do now.” Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and our minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations. As part of relational ethics we seek to deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our participants over time. If our participants become friends, what are our ethical responsibilities towards them? What are our ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves? How can we act in a humane, nonexploitative way, while being mindful of our role as researchers? (Ellis, 2007, p. 5)

Reflecting on how she has grappled with relational ethical issues in her own work, Ellis (1997) offers the following advice to people who wish to engage in autoethnography (see also Ellis, 2004).

- You have to live the experience of doing research with intimate others, think it through, improvise, write and rewrite, anticipate and feel its consequences.
- There is no one set of rule to follow.
- Pay attention to Research Ethics Committee (REC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, but be warned that your ethical work is not done with the granting of REC or IRB approval.
- No matter how strictly you follow REC or IRB procedural guidelines, situations will come up in the field that will make your head spin and your hearts ache.
- Make ethical decisions in research the way you would make them in your personal life.
- Question more and engage in more role taking than you normally do because of the authorial and privileged role that being a researcher gives you.
- Ask questions and talk about your research with others, constantly reflecting

critically on ethical practices at every step.

- Relationships may change in the course of the research – you may become friends with those in your study – and so be aware that ethical considerations may change as well.
- Even when you get consent from those you study, you should be prepared for new complexities along the way.
- Practice “process consent”, checking at each to make sure participants still want to be part of your project.
- Include multiple voices and multiple interpretations in your studies when you can.
- Think about the greater good of your research – does it justify the potential risk to others? And, be careful that your definition of the *greater good* isn’t one created *for your own good*.
- Deal with the ethics of what to tell. What strategies will you choose?
- When possible inform the people you write about. But, remember there are times when this might not be possible or even irresponsible. Sometimes getting consent and informing characters would put them in harm’s way.
- When appropriate, let the participants and those you write about read your work. But remember, sometimes giving your work back to participants could damage the very people and relationships you are intent on helping. If you decide not to take your work back to those you write about you should be able to defend your reasons for not doing so.
- Writing about people who have died will not solve your ethical dilemmas about what to tell and will actually make the dilemmas more poignant.
- You do not own your story. Your story is also other people’s stories. You have no inalienable right to tell the stories of others. Intimate, identifiable others deserve as

least as much consideration as strangers and probably more. You have to live in the world of those you write about and those you write for and to.

- Be careful how you present yourself in the writing.
- Be careful that your research does not negatively affect your life and relationships, hurt you, or others in your world.
- Hold relational concerns as high as research. When possible research from an ethic of care. That's the best you can do.
- You are not a therapist so you should seek assistance from professionals and mentors when you have problems.
- Not only are there ethical questions about doing ethnography but also autoethnography itself is an ethical practice with all that this entails.
- There is a care giving function in autoethnography. (Adapted from Ellis, 2007, pp. 22-26)

Supporting and adding to these suggestions, Tolich (2010) offers ten ethical guidelines for autoethnographers to consider as part of engaging with ethics as a process.

#### *Consent*

1. Respect participants' autonomy and the voluntary nature of participation, and document the informed consent processes that are foundational to qualitative inquiry.
2. Practice 'process consent,' checking at each stage to make sure participants still want to be part of the project.
3. Recognise the conflict of interest or coercive influence when seeking informed consent after writing the manuscript.

#### *Consultation*

4. Consult with others, like an IRB.
5. Autoethnographers should not publish anything they would not show the persons



mentioned in the text.

### *Vulnerability*

6. Beware of internal confidentiality: the relationships at risk are not with the researcher exposing confidences to outsiders, but confidences exposed among the participants of family members themselves.
7. Treat any autoethnography as an inked tattoo by anticipating the author's future vulnerability.
8. No story should harm others, and if harm is unavoidable, take steps to minimise harm.
9. Those unable to minimise risk to self or others should use a nom de plume as the default.
10. Assume all people mentioned in the text will read it one day. (Tolich (2010, pp. 1607-1608)

Clearly, there are numerous ethical issues involved in the process and production of autoethnographies. It is hoped the above advice is a useful starting point for carefully considering some of the ongoing ethical dilemmas.

### A closing

Having offered a brief outline of narrative inquiry in general, and autoethnography in particular, this chapter closes with some modest thoughts about the future of doing this kind of work within PCS. There is much talk in narrative and autoethnographic research about what *potentially* each can offer. Like in PCS, this includes producing research that impacts on individuals, groups, and society. However, there is currently very little 'evidence' that autoethnographies, like much other work done within PCS, has a major impact.

Of course, what counts as 'evidence' and how 'it' can be captured is not simple. There are also important dangers concerning the uncritical promotion of 'evidence-

based' work. For example, often it is suggested that only quantitative work and a positivist paradigm can produce 'evidence that counts'. In so doing, interpretive, qualitative research is discounted outright. Another danger is that when solely reliant on evidence-*based* work, the value of evidence-*informed* work (e.g. harnessing people's experiences in the field, tacit knowledge, practical wisdom, feel for the game, and witnessing stories) is dismissed. Such dangers recognised, the issue of 'evidence' within the current neo-liberal climate is here, and probably for some time. It should then be addressed.

As part of addressing impact and evidence, rather than shying away from these, the prevailing (and limited) ideas as to 'what counts as evidence' needs critically challenging much more (Silk, Bush, & Andrews, 2010). Credible alternative understandings of what 'evidence' can mean needs developing. Likewise, how we might judge 'evidence' needs expanding (Amis & Silk, 2008). Further, autoethnographic and PCS research in the future needs to start providing 'evidence' (whatever that might mean) that our work can make a difference in and on physical culture. I am optimistic that it does (see Smith, Tomasone, Latimer-Cheung, & Martin Gins, 2015). But this difference does not have to be at once 'big' in terms of producing 'solutions' and 'change'. As witnessed in numerous stories heard at conferences and in policy, medical, and sporting contexts, big solutions and change often do not arrive all in one piece. Solutions and change come about in imperceptibly small pieces, and they are recognised as solutions only after these small pieces have aggregated in ways that no one could often have predicted in advance (Frank, 2010). Perhaps this is how autoethnographic work and the PCS project might be best seen: as a boundless variety of infinitesimally small forces that, together, make a positive difference in the lives of those we work with.

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